

## 6. If the Real is Good, What is Evil?

If we let the texts of Genesis 2 and 3 define evil, we come away with the view that evil is the absence of realism; evil is a flight from what is so. Evil is the absence of Reality with a capital "R"; evil is a departure from Reality. Evil is our illusions about Reality.

But are not our illusions real? At least, do not our illusions have real consequences in our living? Illusions are not real, but they do have real consequences in our living. Therefore, if the real is good, then the consequences of illusory living are good. Such consequences are the way the cosmos is supposed to work. It is good that illusions are followed by their consequences. Illusions destroy our close relationships with others, and that is good. Illusions lead to needless violence and warfare, and that is good. Since Reality cannot be defeated, illusions are futile, and that is good. Illusions can never win in the end, and that is good. Illusions are a hopeless way to live, and that is good. Illusions lead to despair, perhaps suicide, perhaps murder, perhaps raging against the whole of life and everyone in it, and such despair is good. It is the way illusory living is supposed to work out. In fact, when we are willing to openly experience the despair in our lives, we are not far from truly understanding what it means to say, "The real is the good."

But from what perspective do we decide what is real and therefore what is good? No human perspective will do, for no human can ever see the whole of Reality. No human sees Reality whole. Reality is unknown. So how can we humans experience the perspective of Reality? Directly, we can't. We experience Reality as a Mystery, as the Unknown Unknown, the No-Thing-Ness from which all things come and to which all things return, as the Every-Thing-Ness in which all things cohere.

In the second and third chapters of the Bible we have a myth about the first humans who eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Apparently, primal humanity before eating from this tree was entirely ignorant of good and evil. We who are living today have all eaten from the forbidden tree. Our parents taught us good and evil; our culture taught us good and evil; our religious bodies taught us good and evil. Our superegos are filled with teachings of good and evil. And without even thinking about it, we believe our superegos. Even after thinking about it, we may still take seriously the teachings lodged in our superegos. We eat these teachings and obey them every day. We expect others to also eat and obey the teachings of our superegos. We may be somewhat generous and allow others to eat and obey the teachings of their own superegos, but we actually feel it would be better if they ate and obeyed the teachings of our superegos. When Western superegos first went to visit primitive tribal groups in out of the way places, they found the superegos of those people appalling. We still do. Christians find Muslims appalling. Muslims find Christians appalling. New Yorkers find Texans appalling. Texans find New Yorkers appalling. The more tolerant among us find the intolerant appalling. The more intolerant among us find the tolerant appalling.

At some point in our life journey we may awaken to the realization that every person's superego is stupid. Indeed, all of us have become stupid by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The snake in the Genesis myth promised that we would become wise like God, but in the context of that story it is quite clear that the snake lied. The truth was spoken by the Infinite Reality walking in the garden of our lives in the cool of the day. Reality asked Adam and Eve why they were hiding behind their fig leaves. The answer was that they were hiding from Reality because they had committed an unreality. They had chosen to believe that they had a knowledge of good and evil that made them wise. Actually, their knowledge of good and evil made them stupid. It killed their true beings. It exiled them from the Garden of Innocence

and condemned them to live in an alien land East of Eden. This consequence was “good” because this is how Reality works: those who choose illusion instead of truth receive a life of estrangement from Reality. Any knowledge of good and evil viewed as ultimately valid by a human mind is an illusion. This includes all the teachings of the Bible, the Koran, or any other book written by human beings, however inspired that book is supposed to be. The knowledge of good and evil is forbidden to the human species, forbidden by Reality. This is the way the cosmos is put together. Ignorance about good and evil is the natural and holy state for a human being.

Any moral principles we possess are no more than useful guidelines. As Jesus said about the Sabbath laws, “The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath.” All rules and principles are created to be useful to the living of human life. Humans are not made to be imprisoned by the rules and principles humans have created or learned. The same applies to all evaluations rendered through any mode of value assessment. After all our thinking about values has been done, we still have to admit total ignorance about what actual actions are best. Those who think they know for sure what to do are in illusion and turn out to be the most destructive forces in human life. Moralism and perfectionism are sin – estrangement from Reality. Ethical ignorance is our natural and holy state.

Why are statements like these so hotly opposed? Because we humans do not believe that the real is good. Part of what is real is good, part is bad; that is what we commonly think. We believe that we know what things are good and what things are evil. We arrogate our puny knowledge to the status of absolute truth. Therefore, we humans do not trust Reality or see it as good. We presume to judge parts of Reality as good and other parts of Reality as evil. This presumption is the foundational estrangement from God described in the opening chapters of the Bible.

In order to experience the good of Reality and Reality as good, we have to give up our right to be the judge of what is good. We have to be content with being ignorant about good and evil. In order for the real to be good, we have to renounce our own superego, our own cultural mores and principles, our own bodies’ wants and desires, our own feelings of comfort and discomfort. We have to stop fleeing from Reality, stop suppressing Reality, stop hating Reality. We have to be open to living the fullness of Reality in each and every situation. This is what it means to embrace the assertion that the real is good.

Embracing Reality as good means being open to Mystery, for Reality is Mysterious. We do not know Reality. All that we know is only a scratch on the great rock of Reality. All that we know is only a drop in the great ocean of Reality. Being open to Reality and its Mystery means being open to, indeed curious about, knowing more. It means being willing to change our minds regularly, perpetually, our whole life long. We never arrive at what we can finally believe. We never learn the final doctrine. We never meet our final teacher. We never become wise like God. If what is real is good, then we must become reconciled to being ignorant, and with never expecting our lives to become without ignorance. Even if we are the most accomplished scholar on earth, we are still ignorant with regard to Reality. A life that affirms that all that is real is good is a life of utmost humility. Humility is the good life, the realistic life, the life that believes that all that is real is good.

We have just described what it means to trust Reality, to apply the devotional word “God” to Reality. This is the saving faith described by Luther. This is the ethical context for all our living spelled out by Bonhoeffer. This is the foundational trust elaborated by H. Richard Niebuhr in his contextual ethics.

Being resigned to Reality is not the same as trusting Reality. Resignation is an act of human will, a calculated choice that going along with Reality rather than fighting Reality is more effective and pleasant. Such resignation is a type of courage. It means

taking the pain and suffering of our lives into ourselves without complaint, without protest. It means suppressing our frustration, disappointment, resentment, and rage toward Reality. It means counting such feelings and attitudes unworthy of us. It means making the best of our lives in spite of the difficulties. It means handling tough situations and grim feelings with the courage of resignation. "This is the way life is, and I can handle it," says the stoic. But this is not yet Christian faith.

The Christian trust of Reality can seem similar to Stoic resignation, but it is very different. Christian trust is not a calculated choice, not an act of human will. Trust of Reality means opening to Reality. It means being open to the reality of our own feelings. It means being open to flow with the flow of Reality. It means embracing the courage to be vulnerable. And most important, trusting Reality means being willing to be healed by Reality, surrendering all hope that we can heal ourselves. Trusting Reality means allowing all our frustration, disappointment, resentment, and rage toward Reality to be experienced, to be confessed, to be brought out into the open as our sin, as our estrangement from the Reality that we do not trust. The journey of trust is a journey into the dark nights of our own deep fears of Reality, rages against Reality, and the humiliations by Reality of our self-constructed programs of living. When we open in this way, Reality does the healing. We only accept the healing. We do not accomplish it.

And what do we mean by healing? We mean overcoming our estrangement from Reality. Stoic courage merely sweeps that estrangement under the rug; or more accurately, it exiles it to a hidden dungeon in the deep unconsciousness. Trust opens the dungeons and allows the sick soul to enter the hospital that Reality provides.

And what is the hospital of Reality like? It is like a father who sees his wayward son heading home from a life of admitted estrangement. This father sees his son coming, runs to meet him, embraces him, welcomes him back into the family, gives him a robe in place of his rags, puts a ring on his finger, and throws a feast.

The elder son does not think that Reality ought to function in this manner. He feels that doing good should be rewarded and doing bad should be punished. The returning son should at least endure a period of probation. A feast is certainly out of order. He feels that "A good guy like me has not been given a feast, why this bad boy?" And he goes into a huge pout.

The father explains that it is appropriate to make merry, "For my son was lost and is found – was dead and is alive again."

Reality welcomes home those who experience the tragedy of their being away. Being away is the punishment. Coming home is the feast. No amends are required. No undoing is necessary. No admission fee of goodness is required. No promises. No intentions. No beliefs. Nothing whatsoever is required except accepting the welcome.

If you don't take the welcome, you collapse in a pool of shame or some other foolish thinking, and you don't make it to the feast. This whole story is a comedy. It is like a big joke. The joke is on all the serious people who have tried so hard to be good by whatever standards they thought were the expected standards. And now it turns out that there are no standards. There are no requirements at all. Just the humiliation of returning home. Just the acknowledgment that you have been away. Just the humility of accepting the huge gift of full membership in the divine family of realistic living without bringing one ounce of acceptability for that membership.

This unconditional forgiveness is the quintessential expression of the goodness of Reality. Each of us is welcome home to Reality. A Universal Pardon extends to all humans. Though we have all eaten from the deadly tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Reality embraces us anyway. And as Reality embraces us, illusions fall away. The goodness of Reality engulfs us. The illusion that we must know good and evil, do the good, and avoid the evil falls away. Trust in Reality's goodness is all that is required.

And this is a strange requirement, for it asks nothing except surrender to the goodness of Reality. We don't have to know what all that means. We don't have to know what foods will be served at the feast. We don't have to know what the future will bring. We only have to trust that Reality is a hospital for the sin-sick souls and that Reality will continue to heal us. All remaining illusions as they bubble up to the surface will be burned to ash by the fires of Reality. All our fears of Reality will be revealed to be needless, silly, and comical. All our rages toward Reality will be revealed to be idiotic and self-punishing. All our monsters of humiliation will evaporate like ice on a hot skillet, for the self being humiliated never existed at all. Our true self is the self at home with Reality, trusting in the goodness of Reality, seeing with our own Spirit eyes and hearing with our own Spirit ears that all that is real is good. This is the joy unspeakable, for the goodness of Reality cannot be taken away.